



# Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Middlebury College UK Trust Limited - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, November 2016

## Section 1: Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit the review panel concludes that Middlebury College UK Trust Limited - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (the Centre) has made commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the [previous monitoring visit](#) in November 2015.

## Section 2: Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 The Centre has appointed one new full-time member of staff to the position of Assistant Senior Tutor and Lecturer in English. The role began in January 2016, with the initial appointment created as fixed term until summer 2018.

3 Student numbers have increased slightly in the current semester to 30 full-time students, an increase of seven since autumn 2015, but remain similar to the numbers registered for spring 2016. Students have been drawn from 20 institutions across the USA.

4 The Centre's Quality Assurance Policy Document (QAPD) has been revised, with an updated version published in September 2016. Student feedback surveys have changed to an online system from autumn 2016, and a separate evaluation of the orientation programme has been introduced.

## Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

5 The initiative taken by the Centre in mapping its provision against relevant chapters of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) was identified as a feature of good practice in the 2014 Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight review. The Centre has revised and extended its QAPD during the past year in order to formalise institutional processes and widen its scope. The QAPD was updated further in September 2016, with annual updates planned. Specific attention has been paid to the relevant Expectations of the Quality Code, particularly in revising procedures for admissions, appeals and complaints. Staff articulated that this process has informed their approach. The Centre does not formally share the QAPD with teaching contractors, but provides all essential quality information to them through other means.

6 The Centre's well-established deliberative structure works effectively and membership of committees provides a valuable external perspective. The Academic Committee maintains robust oversight of operations, including the approval of final grades for assessments, and consideration of appeals and complaints. The Academic Committee reports to the Academic Board, which provides strategic oversight and enhancement of the Centre's provision and quality processes. Annual visits by the Faculty Advisory Board convened by Middlebury College, Vermont, which has oversight of the Centre as part of its network of oversees study programmes, provides an additional external perspective, and ensures that the quality of provision meets North American requirements.

7 The new full-time role of Assistant Senior Tutor and Lecturer in English has already had a positive impact in a number of areas. Academic support has been enhanced within the orientation programme. The provision of study skills has been expanded, enabling students to understand better the intensity and diversity of academic writing required. Optional weekly or fortnightly seminars on academic writing are provided to small groups of students.

8 The Assistant Senior Tutor is also assisting with administrative processes, including the enhancement of learning opportunities. This assistance is evident in the evaluation and analysis of student feedback and achievement data, and a thorough analysis and evaluation of feedback on students' orientation has been undertaken. Detailed analysis of assessment grading by gender, school of origin and subject discipline is now being undertaken, and will inform improvements. The course offer is reviewed at a strategic level annually. As a result of the new appointment, and the broadening of subject expertise, new types of courses are now being introduced, such as environmental literature.

9 Middlebury College maintains oversight of all its study abroad programmes through the Faculty Advisory Board. The Board consists of senior administrators and faculty members from Middlebury College and meets once every semester to consider relevant programme-related academic issues. Additionally, two members of the Faculty Advisory Board make a three-day visit to the Centre each summer to meet staff and students, attend taught sessions and review facilities. The Board produces a detailed annual monitoring report, which is considered by the Academic Board, and contributes to improvements to the academic and support structure of the programme.

10 All admissions decisions are made by the Academic Committee, based solely on academic criteria. Admissions criteria are set out in an Admissions Statement, which is included in the QAPD, and are published, although students are not always clear about the selection criteria for the programme. All students are already enrolled in full-time study at various selective North American universities or liberal arts colleges. The Centre admits students in their third or fourth year of study, and occasionally in their second year. All students are required to have a high grade point average, and to produce an academic personal statement and references from academic tutors. Samples of written work are considered in the selection process.

11 Students confirmed that the Centre's website had been a key information point, and that the information presented is generally clear and accurate. Students stated that the Centre is highly responsive to queries prior to admission.

12 Students are impressed by the arrangements made for their pre-arrival, arrival, induction and orientation. Initial induction at both the Centre and at Keble College, Oxford works effectively. Students value the initial and ongoing staff support and open-door policy of staff at the Centre.

13 All Centre core academic staff hold appointments at Keble College. Much of the teaching is carried out by teaching contractors, who are drawn from a pool of about 100 spread across the University of Oxford, of which 30 are engaged at any one time. Part-time tutors are provided with an induction and guide book, which they regard as helpful and informative. Good contact is maintained with the Centre's core staff, both academic and administrative, on a personal basis, and through regular email contact with the Senior Tutor. Most teaching is undertaken at St Michael's Hall. The Senior Tutor and Assistant Senior Tutor observe lecture and seminar sessions, as do members of the Faculty Advisory Board. Tutorials are not observed, as they operate on the basis of a highly personal relationship. The Academic Committee meets formally with teaching contractors twice per term. The Centre organises informal and formal events in which teaching contractors

participate. One part-time tutor had been supported on a visit to Middlebury College. Teaching contractors consider themselves to be well supported by core staff at the Centre.

14 Students and teaching staff commented positively on the detailed assessment grading criteria provided. Students study a four-week intensive research programme, and are required to produce an extensive research-based essay. The essay is double marked according to published grading criteria. Students attend one, two-hour seminar weekly, assessed according to set criteria, which includes students' contribution, and a written seminar paper. Students also attend two, one-hour individual tutorials per week, for which they have to produce a weekly essay. Essays are not awarded individual marks, but notes are kept of all tutorials and verbal feedback is given. Criteria for the grading of tutorials are less explicit, although students' progress and development is taken into account. Students are happy with the workload, balance of academic activities, and assessment processes. They also value the thorough marking, annotation, verbal feedback and written reports with which they are provided on assessments.

15 Students commented favourably about the ways in which they are supported by staff at the Centre, including administrative staff and junior deans. Students are highly appreciative of the environment in which they were able to live and work, the quality of the resources open to them in Oxford, the challenging and individualised nature of the programme, and the academic engagement they are able to experience. They also value the extracurricular opportunities open to them in areas such as sport and music, which augmented the experiences of their home campuses.

16 The Centre operates a system of a Junior Common Room at St Michael's Hall. Elected student representatives have dedicated roles, and meet weekly as a Junior Common Room committee. Students feel able to raise concerns through these meetings, although the informal contact between staff and students is also considered valuable and supportive. Students are also members of the Junior Common Room at Keble College. Students complete evaluative questionnaires at the end of orientation and at the end of each semester, which are used to make improvements.

17 Further progress has been made in embedding systems for identifying and supporting students with disabilities. The Centre works with the disabilities office of the students' home universities and colleges, and operates under the terms of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). All students have mandatory private health insurance, which facilitates access to counselling and mental health services in Oxford. The Centre is able to support students who have disclosed dyslexia. Any student with a physical disability is able to access appropriate residential accommodation at Keble College. In the monitoring report of November 2015 it was noted that the provision of a lift at St Michael's Hall is high priority for the Centre, and negotiations for this remain ongoing.

#### **Section 4: Progress in working with the relevant external reference points relating to academic standards and quality for higher education**

18 The Centre's main external reference points are the requirements of the US institutions from which students are drawn. In particular, the courses have to be approved by the academic management procedures of Middlebury College. Transcripts are issued by Middlebury College. The Centre has also been approved by the British Accreditation Council since 2009, the most recent inspection visit having taken place in April 2015.

19 The Centre mapped its provision against relevant chapters of the Quality Code in 2013. The review and development of the Centre's QAPD has further enabled a more

extensive use of the expectations of the Quality Code, although explicit references are not cited in the document.

20 Some of the Centre's teaching contractors are preparing applications for fellowship of the Higher Education Academy as part of the staff development activity.

## **Section 5: Background to the monitoring visit**

21 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

22 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Simon Ives, Review Manager, and Dr Helen Corkill, Reviewer, on 8 November 2016.

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